

Amiens, Objective of the German Offensive, Is Not Decisive Point, Says Belloc

FIGHT CENTER AT JUNCTURE OF BRITISH AND FRENCH

By HILLAIRE BELLOC.

LONDON, April 7.—The great German offensive has now been under way for nine days, but the result still hangs in the balance as I write, and in spite of the terrific fighting that has taken place and is still continuing, in spite of the extent of the retreat of the allied forces and of the hundreds of thousands of men who have been killed, the situation remains unchanged. It will continue to be essentially the same whether or not the Hun advances farther—even if he reaches the main railway line about St. Just or Compiègne on the Oise. His victory or defeat will still depend, no matter how great an advance he succeeds in making, upon the three main tactics following:

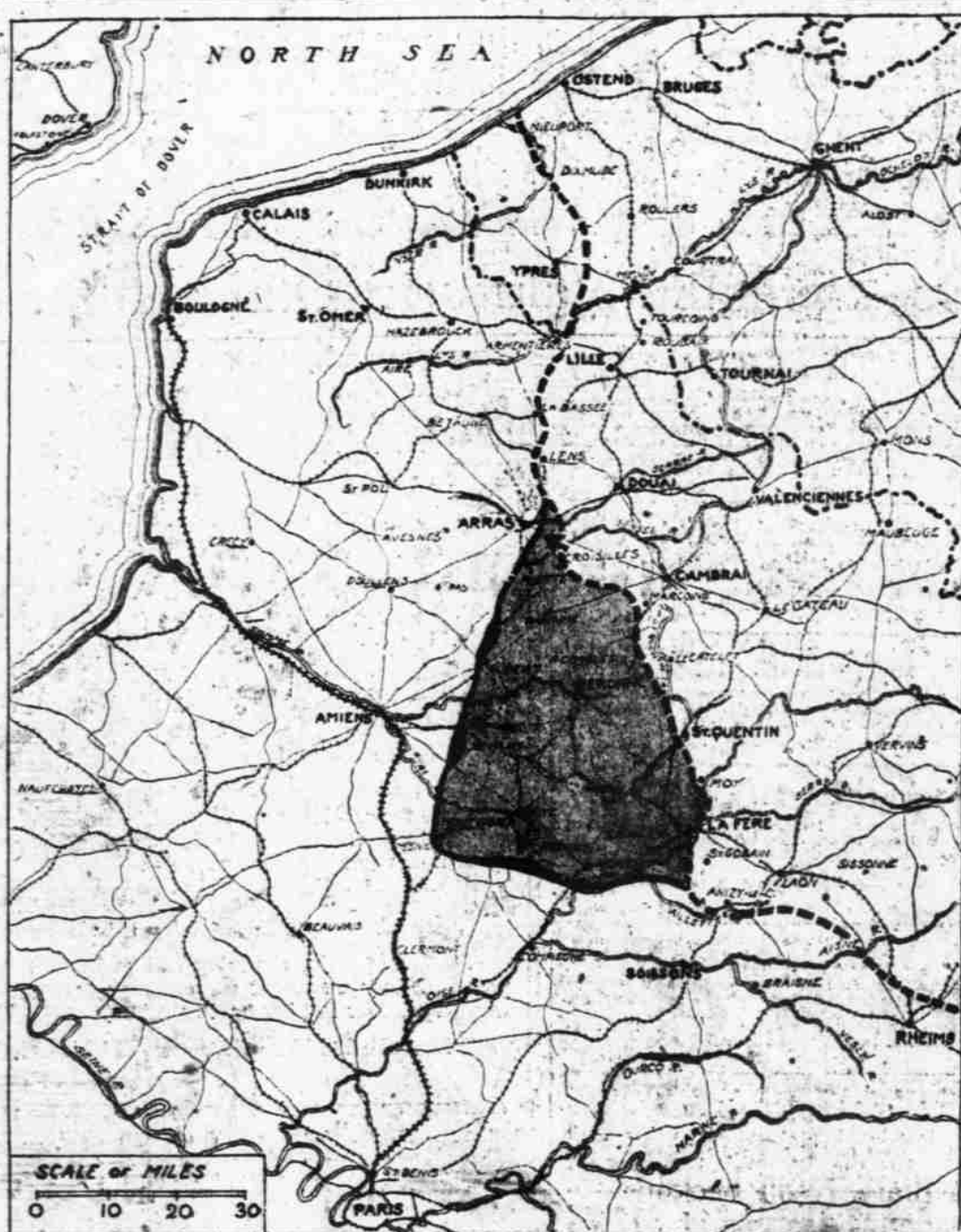
The maintenance of the touch between the British and French armies. The comparative weakening by losses of the enemy's forces in attack and of our own in retreat.

The effect upon the German line of the impact of the main allied reserve when the allied high command decides that the moment to throw it into action has arrived.

In regard to the first, the maintenance of contact and the holding of an unbroken line which will prevent a critical breaking through by the enemy depend on the defensive strength of the British and French forces. With the smaller American and Portuguese contingents. This has been shown so far by the fact that the defending line is still unbroken and will continue to be shown by the successes in keeping that line intact.

The second of these points, that regarding the comparative rate of loss, is the only one on which even a rough judgment can be made at present. The enemy has already thrown into his attack something like seventy-five divisions of infantry, and he is probably prepared to use half as much again, because, although such an expense will ruin him if he fails, he is staking everything on a rapid success.

He has so far lost, perhaps, in the



The shaded area shows the territory of nearly 1,000 square miles occupied by the Germans since March 21. The heavy black line shows where the drive was stopped and the points where the line thickens shows the territory where the allies' counter attacks have been successful. The three arrows show the points where the heavy German attack made against the British and French has failed. Just north of Demuin is the place where the British and French armies join.

neighborhood of one-third of all the infantry he has actually engaged, certainly more than a quarter, also

certainly more than double and perhaps nearly three times as much as the defense, in spite of their counter attacks. The effect of this bleeding upon the enemy's army of assault, and what is almost equally important, upon the remainder of his line will only be seen when the allied reserves come into play and until that event all estimates of the results are without value.

The action of the enemy in the course of the last six days—from Saturday, March 30, to Thursday, April 4—is based on the necessity for extremely rapid action. This is proved by his use of infantry in great masses and at immense expense, without waiting fully to bring up his heavy artillery, and by putting all the weight of his attack on the junction of the British and French armies, which is also the sector where his is nearest to the main line of railway between Amiens and Paris.

This sector has Montdidier on the south and the Somme river on the north. It is here that he is continuing, at an unprecedented expense, his effort to break through. Two days have been especially marked for this. Last Saturday he attacked with greater force for the first time than ever before, and he lost more heavily than any other day. That attack gave him about 1,500 yards' depth over about three miles of front.

There has been, of necessity, a lull of four days in which to reorganize. The losses in the attacking infantry have been at least 40 per cent, since it has not been properly supported by guns. More artillery has come up by Wednesday evening, but the second attack on Thursday was still at a disproportionate expense in his infantry.

It achieved less than the first attack, at any rate, in its first phase, for it is still continuing. The center was at Morquie, just where the two armies join. The allied line gave about half a mile in the course of the day both to the north and south of that town, but nothing in the center.

It must be remembered that at the moment this telegram is being sent, the dispatches refer to this action as still continuing.

This question of losses is in its bearing on the ultimate result of the war, perhaps, the first and most important fact in the whole struggle, because if the German's expense in life does not warrant the result which he obtains his desperate gamble has been lost. He is undertaking to pay a truly gigantic price in dead, pressing his attacks almost without regard to cost and a single eye to a very rapid decision.

The Germans, on the other hand, have thrown in, as I will explain later, the great mass of their available strength for the purpose of obtaining a decision as rapidly as possible. But there remains behind that mass a certain proportion of untouched human material effective for the shock of battle, which the German commander can still bring in, and with which they hope to obtain their decision.

Which of the two almost equal weights, thus balanced in final count, will tip the beam and bring victory, fate only knows. But that it is still possible to confine the contact at all is due to the continued heroic maintenance of the British line to the north, after a retreat of a severity unparalleled even in this war.

Great Battle Open.
On Fifty-mile Front.

The great battle, as my readers will remember, was opened a little before dawn on Thursday, March 21. The Germans had concentrated for their assault upon the right of the British line on a front of fifty miles between the Scarpe and the Oise, a total force, including reserves, of over seventy divisions, to be rapidly followed by at least another thirty divisions. That was considerably more than half of their total forces upon the western front—nearly half of their entire army's organization. It included vastly more than half of all their artillery, and far more than half of those effective, highly trained and carefully chosen units, with which a violent shock could be delivered, and which were in a condition to sustain heavy losses without disorganization.

The German's object was to separate the British from the French armies, protecting themselves after this separation had been accomplished against a French attack from the south by the marshy valley of the Oise, which lay on the extreme left of their assault. After they had produced this rupture they intended to roll up the British line and to destroy it before any allied concentration against them could take place, during the several days required for such a concentration. Rapidly of move-

ment was the very essence of success for them, for the price to be paid in lives was very high indeed. Therefore, all available strength was employed.

Throughout all these actions the retreat was conducted with the utmost steadiness, with the infliction of terrific losses on the attackers and with the minimum of damages to the allied armies.

On Tuesday the advance continued steadily all along the line, passing Noyon and Roye and practically reaching the edges of the area evacuated by the Germans in the spring of 1917. On Wednesday a British counter attack recovered something like five miles' depth of territory along the Somme, and there was no advance in the north, but the middle of the salient was extended perhaps two or three miles. On Thursday, with the line practically held in the north, the Germans shifted their attack to the front between Arras and Lens and succeeded in driving in the British outposts, but accomplished nothing more. At the lower end of the salient a sharp bulge developed which carried the Germans through Montdidier. At the same time the French holding the heights west of the Oise counter attacked sharply, driving the Germans back for about three miles on a ten-mile front and seriously impeding the German's salient to their left.

Main British Line Remained Unbroken.

The main British defensive positions were pierced just west of St. Quentin on the afternoon of Friday, March 22, as I recounted in my last article, but the British line was not shattered. It reformed and, therefore, also, the allies were not separated. The German drive continued with a slackening pace, but uninterruptedly, nevertheless.

From a bulge containing an angle of perhaps 150 degrees, the allied line—as Peronne, Bapaume, and Albert were successively lost—came to form a right angle of 90 degrees. With the French evacuation of Montdidier, on the seventh day of the battle, the situation had grown critical in the full sense of that word. That is to say, that the judgment that history will pass on this battle still hung even for either party.

But most important of all, since the line of battle had reached this unexpected conformation of a right angle, there had appeared on the southern face of the line a sector no longer protected by the marshy valley of the Oise, but exposed after so long an interval to the concentration of French forces still held in reserve, and stretching over more than twenty miles of open country. If the French pressure here against the Germans should be increased beyond the enemy's power to contain it, he will be in grave peril. If the enemy himself can extend his front here and get elbow room, especially if in doing so he could still break through the main front between Montdidier and Arras, victory would be his.

Not the mere reaching of that chief railway line which runs through Amiens, still less the German occupation of the city of Amiens, would decide the war. But the destruction of the force opposing the German armies would do so, and this destruction could only be accomplished, on the one hand by warding off the peril from the French which had unexpectedly developed upon his left flank, and on the other hand by breaking through on the main front still opposed to him.

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drive, is not a decisive point. The rupture of the British line is the matter that the German army has on hand. It was with the object of accomplishing this that the Germans, in the middle of last week, pushed with all their strength just south of the Somme, along the main road originally built by the Romans, which runs from St. Quentin to Amiens. They reached by Saturday night the points of Hamel, Marcelcave, and Demuin.

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